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In his farewell address in January 1961, President Dwight Eisenhower warned against the military-industrial complex, the cozy relationship between the Pentagon, Congress and defense contractors. In April 2009, Defense Secretary Robert Gates proposes to do something significant about it. He wants Congress to cut big-ticket items from all the major services: the Air Force's F-22 fighter, the Army's family of Future Combat Systems and the Navy's DDG 1000 destroyer.

One service was notably spared the budget ax. The how and why suggests that Gates can be politically cagey as well as bold. The Marines are the smallest, cheapest and, arguably, the bravest of them all — "The Few, the Proud, the Marines" is not just a recruiting gimmick. The Marines were quicker than the Army to think about how to fight nasty, small wars — and do it without spending vast sums of money. But the Marines are a proud service, and they worry about becoming too much like the Army. They want to preserve their historic mission of landing on foreign shores in small boats.

The Marines last major amphibious operation was in 1950, a highly successful maneuver at Inchon in Korea.

Since then, landing troops by sea (which, historically, has been an often-bloody gambit—think of Gallipoli and Tarawa) has become an increasingly dodgy proposition. Today, all but the poorest countries are likely to possess radar, mines and ship-killing missiles. Even the take-that-hill ethos of the Marines recoils at sailing into slaughter.

For almost 40 years, the Marines' landing craft has been the AAV, the Amphibious Assault Vehicle. Carrying 25 men and three crew, it's meant to be launched two miles off shore and it pokes along at 8mph—a sitting duck at sea. It can move on land, but the old, thinly armored vehicles were taken out of combat in Iraq when IEDs turned them into death traps.

The Marines are working on a new landing craft called the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle. It would launch from 25 miles out ("over the horizon") and move at 25mph. Heavily armored (38 tons versus the AAV's 23 tons) it requires a turbojet engine, which makes it look like "a tank on water skis," according to its critics. And there are many critics. The EFV has been in development for 14 years and its cost has tripled to \$23 million each. With ship-killing missiles getting ever deadlier, the EFV would seem to be a candidate for cancellation by a pennywise SecDef.

But Gates kept it in the budget he proposed last week. Politics had nothing to do with it, insists spokesman Geoff Morrell. Rather, as Gates explained, he wants to take up the whole issue of the amphibious mission in the coming year when the Pentagon engages in a long-term review of defense priorities.

There is another good reason to kick the issue down the road. The Marines are famous for their political savvy. The Army wheezily jokes that while an Army squad commonly has 12 men, a Marine squad has 13—the extra is a PR officer. Trying to kill a favorite Marine Corps weapons system can be an exercise in futility. During the Bush 41 administration, then—Defense secretary Dick Cheney tried no less than four times to eliminate funding for the V-22 Osprey, which flies today. The Marines have close ties on Capitol Hill—none better than Pennsylvania Rep. John Murtha, the powerful chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense and a combat-decorated 37-year veteran of the U.S. Marines. Last week, Murtha praised Gates's budget. As they say in the Corps, Semper Fi.